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## LOVE SONGS.\*

BY MRS. DOUGLAS WILSON.

THE love story and the love song will ever remain favourites with old and young; and the most ancient, yet the freshest and sweetest, are those the birds would tell us in spring-time, in wood and lane and hedgerow. To be landed into the thick of the very haunts of the nightingale within half an hour's train ride from Baker Street, seems almost a fairy story; nevertheless, within that short space of time, we found ourselves early last June wandering in bird fairy-land, the air full of tuneful melody.

For some hours we walked leisurely through lanes and hedgerows, fresh with spring flowers and bursting buds. The air was so full of song tangle, that at first it seemed almost impossible to disengage one warble from another, until a clear, shrill, penetrating note cleaving the air and dwarfing all other sounds, discovered to us that the nightingale was near. Many people imagine that the nightingale sings only at night, but it is a well-known fact that his singing continues from sunrise till long after sunset, although it is in the gloaming when the bird world is silent, that his song can be best heard and appreciated.

Twice, the clear, resonant, long-drawn note was repeated, and then followed a continuous stream of luscious sounds, tumbling pell mell the one over the other, in a very cascade of ecstasy.

The singer sat well in view at the extreme end of an oak branch, the sun raining down and burnishing his ruddy back with gold. As though aware that he was being watched and admired, he sang stanza after stanza with endless variations, beginning every fresh burst of song with the two clear long-drawn notes as prelude.

In appearance, the nightingale is somewhat like a small, slim thrush, but his back and tail are a reddish brown, his breast a greyish white. While he was singing, all other bird

\* A Natural History Ramble of the P.N.E.U.

music seemed to cease, but during a longer pause than usual between the two bursts of song, it was evident that the other birds were all tuning away on their own account, thoroughly indifferent to any but their own joys.

From a leafy bower came the two quaint notes of the chiff-chaff. The bird was safely hidden from view by his lattice of green, behind which he continued his "chiff-chaff, chiff-chaff," as though pleased with himself and all the world.

Did the nightingale resent this transference for a moment of our attention, or was he anxious to see how home affairs were progressing? All suddenly, he ceased singing in the middle of a verse and flew down into a bramble thicket by the hedgerow, a very characteristic spot for the nest of the nightingale.

During the afternoon, many nightingales were heard by us, but he was the only one who allowed himself to be seen, either at rest or on the wing.

Now that the king's voice was silent, we became conscious of a singer almost as beautiful as the nightingale. The notes were longer sustained, but they bubbled forth with a dainty delicacy and a richness, that can be imagined only by one who has heard the blackcap. Seeing a trespasser, the bird gave out a harsh rasping note of warning to his mate, who sat on her nest close by.

Bird songs and nesting have almost the same meaning, and while our ears were all alert to listen, our eyes were on the watch to spy out the nests, which prompted such joyous carollings.

The blackcap's nest, a small cup-shaped building of grass and moss, was built high up in the bosom of the hedge, and on the nest sat Mrs. Blackcap, anxiously watching our every movement. Sometimes the male bird takes his turn in sitting on the nest, and it is said that he often sings in this position. The mother bird can be distinguished from her lord, by her cap of ruddy brown, in contrast to the shiny black poll, from which her husband receives the name of blackcap.

As soon as we had moved to a safe distance, the male bird, feeling danger past, burst forth in a new love carol of joy.

Our quest was a double one; to find as many nests as we could, and to distinguish and contrast the love ditties of the birds now in full song. Nests were everywhere, in the most

likely and unlikely places, and the very simplicity of their position safeguarded them. The hedges were sparingly draped just then, but a few days of sunshine and warmth, and the dress of green would be so complete, as to hide even those in the most exposed situations.

Suspended in a hawthorn spray hung a nest of the pretty little white-throat. The glitter of two bead-like eyes drew our attention, but although we were so close to her, the mother did not seem at all disturbed by our presence. Her apparent trustfulness made us feel almost ashamed of our pertinent prying, so we beat a hasty retreat and left her to her home joys and matronly cares.

It is an open question whether the song of the thrush or the blackbird is the most beautiful. But every thrush seems to have a different note from his brother, and yet in every thrush song we could not help noticing how many of the notes were imitative of the nightingale. Do the young thrushes copy our great singer, when first they begin to warble? We nearly trod on some young thrushes, which had but a few hours previously left their nest and were hopping about among the grass and bramble sprays beneath.

The empty nursery was full of feather dust, a sure sign that the birds had been fully fledged before leaving. Behind a withered spray of last year's bramble leaves, a bullfinch had skilfully poised its nest, and here again the sitting mother took little heed of our presence. The nest of the bullfinch might be that of a miniature wood-pigeon. So loosely is it knit together, that in spite of the lining of roots, the eggs can be clearly seen through the slight structure. All the time a mother bullfinch is sitting, she keeps turning the eggs with her feet, just as a wood-pigeon does. One home we found quite deserted, drowned by the recent rains. It was the nest of the hedge sparrow, and contained one pretty blue egg. The builders had flitted, let us hope to safer quarters.

What a ventriloquist the cuckoo is! At one moment his voice seemed close to our ear, at another, far away in the distance, and we were not a little surprised to discover the bird resting on a paling not far off, his tail dipping and rising each time he piped forth his two notes.

In the bosom of a fir tree, the wood-pigeon crooned softly to his wife, "Don't scold so, Sukey, don't"; and in contrast

to his melancholy, a frisky, pert little robin piped forth in shrill trebles for sheer gladness that the sun was warm and bright, and that summer was near. We searched in all the likely spots for a robin's nest, but the rascal was too clever for us this time, though during our quest we discovered the nest of a reed warbler by the hedgeside. It was a perfect work of art, raised from the ground on some reeds, and built of dry grass, strengthened by rootlets. Tall sentinels of the wild hyacinth, with the blue bells just expanded, guarded the nest in front and rear. We did not get a sight of the builders of this beautiful home, which we carefully looked at without touching, lest we should desecrate its sanctity and perhaps cause the birds to forsake it.

Poets and singers have their great periods when their flight of song is at its highest, and with the woodland songsters, that point is reached and sustained, while the children are helpless and under the parents' wing.

Later, when the young birds mature and leave the nest, the song of the parent dies away in sad and broken chords, especially noticeable in the lay of our greatest singer, the nightingale. But on that bright June afternoon, there was no sweet melancholy, but only the joyousness of love and sweetness and life, that even on murky November days the echo of the old love songs we heard cleaves the air around and takes us back in memory to those "Temples not made with hands."